FREE ISSUE 349 AUGUST 25 - SEPTEMBER 7, 1992 1041-3812

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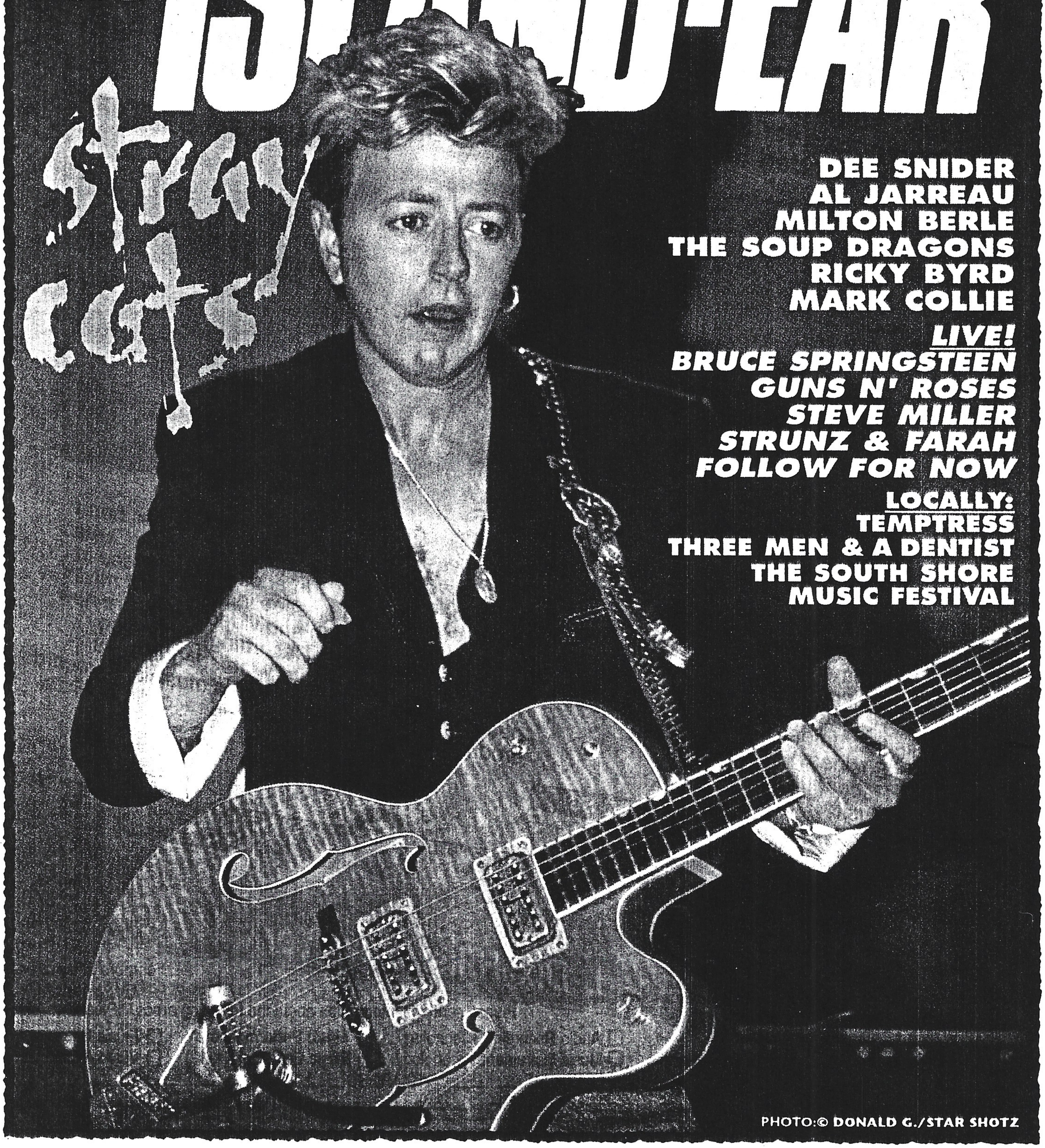

DEE SNIDER
AL JARREAU
MILTON BERLE
THE SOUP DRAGONS
RICKY BYRD
MARK COLLIE

LIVE!
BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN
GUNS N' ROSES
STEVE MILLER
STRUNZ & FARAH
FOLLOW FOR NOW

LOCALLY:
TEMPTRESS
THREE MEN & A DENTIST
THE SOUTH SHORE MUSIC FESTIVAL

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Stray Cats BUILT TO LAST

BY DANNY McCUE

They grew up in a community where the creation of malls was a developer's manifest destiny. It was Massapequa, New York, to be specific, the 1970's, and even in high school Brian Setzer, Jim McDonnell and Leon Drucher struck people as being a little different. Born too late to be pioneers in the realm of attitude as aesthetic, their penchant for '50s clothes, cars and Gene Vincent nevertheless got them noticed. At night and on weekends, or whenever Setzer wasn't busy with his other band, the Bloodless Pharoahs, they were crafting a sound that was all their own.

The Stray Cats' story, however, really doesn't begin in earnest until 1980, when, known but not really making it in local clubs, they set out for Great Britain. Arriving in London only to find that previously-booked gigs and accommodations were either unavailable or nonexistent, the band (McDonnell and Drucher now calling themselves Slim Jim Phantom and Lee Rocker, respectively) moved into the office of their publicist and set out to make a name for themselves in the city's pubs. Two hit Lps, the epimoniously titled *Stray Cats* and *Gonna Ball* soon followed, and within months they were opening for the Pretenders, Elvis Costello and the Clash, among others. America, which would get a taste of both British releases in the guise of *Built For Speed*, capitulated the following autumn, when the compilation Lp occupied the #2 position for 15 consecutive weeks.

By any standards the band's run in the early part of the last decade was a successful one, *Built For Speed* having spawned two hit singles (complete with videos directed by Julien Temple), "Rock This Town" and "Stray Cat Strut," while its follow-up, 1983's *Rant N' Rave*, gave them their third Top 5 single in a row ("(She's) Sexy + 17"). On *Choo Choo Hot Fish*, the Stray Cats' first album in four years and most consistent since the band's mid-Eighties break-up and make-up, Brian Setzer and company continue to refine the vibe they first happened upon nearly fourteen years ago. Always more fun than they were painstakingly revivalist, the expatriate Long Islanders (all three currently reside in Los Angeles) now find themselves in the inenviable position of waiting to see if they'll get another shot at the top.

In the meantime, Brian Setzer, so long ago credited on the band's albums for "Croonin' and Strummin'," is talking to the press... and raising a 5-year-old named Cody Setzer in the warm California sun.

Has being a Dad wreaked havoc on your music career?

Yeah, they pretty much turn your whole life inside out, nevermind your musical life. They're something. [Touring] is hard because I've got to be away from him. You come back and, Cody's kind of bratty, so when I come off the road I've got to get some discipline in his life again [laughs].

The big question: Do you see yourself becoming your Dad?

Oh yeah. Man, I'm telling you. I hear myself saying things that my Dad had said to me and I go, "Oh no Brian, you didn't just say that!?" [laughs] You know, like, [puts on his 'Daddy' voice] "If I've got to turn this car around I'm going to... " [laughs] A second later you're thinking, "Oh no, please... "

Now, the Stray Cats haven't recorded in four years... what did you do in all that time?

Well, you know, we've been touring almost nonstop. Although we don't play here that much, we've been in Europe and Japan and Australia, so mostly, I'd say, we've been out on the road. We don't stop because we have a following that belies our recording thing. It doesn't matter if we have an album out, we have an audience that always comes to see us... so that's really our bread and butter.

"I THINK THE MISTAKE THAT PEOPLE MAKE IS THAT THEY TREAT [ROCKABILLY] LIKE A MUSEUM PIECE... I THINK THE THING YOU'VE GOT TO LET IT DO IS, YOU'VE GOT TO LET IT BREATHE."

Do you release records with anymore frequency overseas?

Well, there've been a couple of things that have been kind of half-baked. We cut a record with Nile Rodgers for a label that went bankrupt before we could get it out — actually we've been on two labels that have gone bankrupt. Plus there's been a lot of internal, music business-related nonsense that we've had to deal with. They pull the rug out from under you. A couple of those things happened. In the meantime I've written songs with people, I've played on a lot of records — with Dave Edmunds, for instance — there have even been a couple of country records that I've played on, believe it or not. So it's been back and forth.

What was your immediate reaction to having those labels fold on you?

My reaction is, I don't know what goes on in the business infrastructure. I'm not a very good businessman, I never was. What surprises me is the lack of commitment, on the part of record company people, to music in general. There are people who get into this, not for the music at all. It would be like me or you getting into the ball-bearing business. Do you care about ball-bearings? These people get into the music business and they can care less about music. [exasperated] I can not believe that. There are a lot of those people.

There are always going to people who get into the arts who just consider it a business, but you hope that if they're there, they'll be agents or something. Do you think there are people on the 'creative' side who are like that as well?

Oh both. I mean [sighs], Well, both the A&R and the business side. They look at something as a number and a potential hit and that's about it.

What led to your signing with Great Pyramid?

Um... they really showed interest and really... wanted us. They've got The Band, Joe Walsh, and I think, Lynyrd Skynyrd or something, and they really wanted us. And it seemed like a "Why not?" proposition. It's hard to tell, even after all these years, whether it would be better to go with a CBS and potentially have them bury you, or go with a smaller label. Man, Great Pyramid has committed everything so far: we got Dave Edmunds to produce the record, who despite being our friend, ain't cheap [laughs]. We got Julien Temple to do the video, who again, even though he did the earlier stuff, ain't cheap either. He's since worked with the Stones and stuff. So the label has come through on everything we've wanted. At least they seem interested.

Did The Band's and Joe Walsh's being on the label influence your decision to go with them?

Yeah. I kind of like being on a label with cool artists, with people who I think are good. It's kind of nice. I don't think it's imperative... if you're on a label with Madonna, you're on a label with Madonna. It's kind of nice being on a boutique label — that's what they call it — where all of the artists are sort of hand-picked.

Besides producing the record, Dave Edmunds also plays on "Crybaby." Was that a case of his deciding "this song is hot, I'm going to get in on it?" What exactly is your relationship with him like?

Oh, it's like, "You know boys, I'd love to play on a track with you." And we say, "Well, c'mon. You can play on the whole album if you want." Dave Edmunds to me is so, far and away [laughs]... he's one of my idols, you know? I get goose bumps when he plays — and sings. So we chose "Crybaby," which was really a song given to him that he gave to us. He both sings on that and plays guitar.

What does he do in the studio that makes him really click with you as a producer?

[Takes a deep breath] Well, first of all, you have the real obvious things: he records the stand-up bass in a way that is so great... I mean, so powerful... and he's the only person that's ever been able to do that. And then we have the guitar sounds — he hears the same guitar sounds that I do, which are always tough because either you've got some

ridiculous distorted sound, which is just some Les Paul guitar through a Marshall amp — the heavy metal sound — or you've got a really clean country sound, and anything in-between is a battle. He knows what I want the guitar to sound like, which, when I'm playing my Gretch, for instance, is sort of powerful, but clean. And he likes those same sounds, so we've got that in common. And then, oh man, on this album he was really good at busting down barriers for me and just letting me play my guitar and not worry whether the sound was getting too heavy or whether something sounded tough enough. He would just say, "Play" and we would work on it from there.

This might sound like a weird question, but when you're away from the guitar and you're hearing something musical in your head, do you hear the guitar parts as you'd play them, or do you hear a sound or approach that you're still unable to attain?

[Considers a moment] Guitar parts come in bits and pieces. It's sort of like, 'Oh wait, I definitely want to throw this in there,' and the rest of it I just kind of let come in free-form. Then, on this record, Dave might go, "Oh, that's kind of too much, Brian. Slow it down a little bit." I find that as you get older, you're playing tends to get a little less note-tedious, you know what I mean? You've got your little doodle-ee doot doot doodle-ee jazz thing, and you'll just play a couple of notes over it for a couple of bars.

Are you still in search of the ideal tone?

Oh. That's a good question. You see, it's always something different. On this record I used three guitars. I used a D'Angelico jazz arch-top, and I used a Supra 400, which is another arch-top, and then I used my Gretch. The Gretch is the rock and roll stuff. The other guitars are magic, you just put a mic in front of them and you don't have to do anything else. With the Gretch, to get the sound you want, it's always moving the mics around, trying different mics, you're always one step behind yourself, thinking you can get it just that much better [laughs] — and you know what you have to do? You have to exhaust every possibility and then say, "Okay, I've tried everything: I tried making it louder, it didn't help. Moving the mics didn't help. This is what I want." Then I mark it down on a piece of paper, "The mic should be this far away from the amp... " and so on. That's how I do it.

One of the songs on this album, "My Heart Is A Liar," sounds like you're moving in a totally new direction, that you're drawing on different influences. Tell me about that song.

Well, I'll tell you what it was inspired by — well, actually it was two things — the Everly Brothers and that song by Extreme, "More Than Words." I heard that and said, "What a beautiful song!" I mean, here's two guys who are in, you know, a heavy metal band, playing this tender sort of ballad. I go, "Oh, that's really cool. I want to write something like that." So I put together a chord progression and kind of got a little melancholy, looked out the window and wrote the song. At the same time you can't sit down and say, "This is what the song is going to be. It's going to be exactly like this." It never works like that.

Rockabilly is a real authentic, very specific genre. While you're writing are you conscious of... well... not trying to wreck it?

I think the mistake that people make is that they treat it like a museum piece. Down here [in Los Angeles] there's a huge rockabilly, rock and roll movement — now it's hip again. Should I have some trophies made for these people? I don't know. These people want it to be their own thing. They don't want it to be popular, because it's "theirs." But I think the thing you've got to let it do is, you've got to let it breathe. You know what I mean? To me it's always important that the stand-up bass be there and that I'm playing my Gretch guitar and that the rhythm is being pounded out in Jim's unique drumming style, but as long as I have that and it remains what it is, then I can just let it go musically.

When you look back at the things you wrote when you were younger, in what ways would you say you've progressed as a writer?

I'm really happy with this new record. I mean, it's one of the few things I can listen back to, besides the real early stuff. Um... I think I'm getting away from the I-IV-V chord turnarounds, which is the blues. See, I'm not really a big blues fan. I know that sounds weird. I have trouble sitting down and playing a blues. I'm more of a jazz fan. What I'd really like to do is, well, if you ever listen to an old Roy Orbison song you can hear it. He has songs within songs. That's my ultimate goal: to write a song like that; a song that deeps changing, changing keys, and yet the whole damn thing works.

Okay, now you just said you have trouble sitting down and playing a blues. Why?

I'm not a big white blues fan. I've never been influenced by... I don't know... it's just that growing up [sings the basic blues progression], that's what I remember all the white guys playing and it just wasn't... colorful enough. It was just really kind of dull to me. I mean, when you listen to Robert Johnson or Albert Collins, that, to me, is the blues; but when I was growing up people associated the blues with a whole generation of white players who sort of learned it second-hand. Joe Pass plays the blues. I could never get into a lot of the late-'60s white pseudo-blues...

Several of the band's songs over the years have had a songwriting credit that reads: "Setzer, Rocker, Phantom." What does that mean, exactly? And who brings in the most stuff? I always assumed it was you.

Um [long pause] yeah. Well, now, I'm the guitar player, so I'm the one who's expected to come up with the crux of the stuff. I basically come up with the idea of how a song is supposed to go, the melody and quite a bit of the chords, and then Jim and Lee come in and throw in some stuff that's equally important. For instance they'll say, "Do you want this song set in the present or should it be a song about the past?" or "You've got two different ideas going on here, Brian..." And I'll be like, "Oh gee, you're right." So they contribute important ideas.

Is the creativity within the band a very ordered thing or is there a lot of chaos somewhere along the line?

I'm kind of nuts, you know? Those guys have got to reign me in. You mean order in terms of writing?

Yeah. I mean, are the Stray Cats a seamless organization at this point or does making music resemble a train wreck waiting to happen until you actually get into a studio and commit songs to tape?

We're all different personalities. We've known each other all of our lives, so we kind of know how to deal with each other and when not to step into each other's private territory, if you know what I mean. So it's a little bit of everything. It kind of works. I'm very ordered, and yet I'm very disorganized in a lot of ways. And Jim is the same way. Lee is very calm and consistent.

Do you need one guy in the band to be that way? Is that the essential element?

I don't know. I saw a band just last night with like, ten people in it, and I just shook my head. I don't know how those guys are making it work [laughs]. Three people for me is like, enough.

What are the next six months in the lives of the Stray Cats going to hold?

I don't want to jinx anything, but I really feel like I've got a good record this time. I'm real excited about this thing. So it's kind of new, again. And I guess we've just got to wait and see if we've got a shot again here. And if we do, then we'll go out on an extended tour. If not, then, you know, it's kind of hard to go out and lose money [laughs]. It's hard to justify that. ●